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An Untraditional Way

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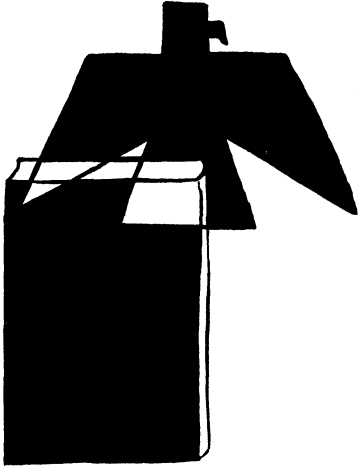
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Abstract

Johnny looked about the dimly lit hogan. It was nothing but a few stout timbers covered with mud. In the center of the ceiling, there was a small square hold through which the smoke from the fire drifted...



An Untraditional Way

By Michael R. Vasey

JOHNNY LOOKED about the dimly lit hogan. It was nothing but a few stout timbers covered with mud. In the center of the ceiling, there was a small square hole through which the smoke from the fire drifted. Barren walls, mud floor, a few colorful blankets here and there. Not much to look at. Not even an iron stove. These old women still cooked over the open fire that was used, also, to heat the place. In the far corner, there was a pile of wood. A blanket was thrown over it to keep out the rain that inevitably came through the smoke hole on nights like this. Along the walls were scattered small bundles of personal possessions.

“No, Mother, I am not going to stay home this time.” Every time Johnny came home from the mission school at Ganado, it was the same story. Every time they, Mother and Old Mother, wanted him to stay home and mind the sheep, and get married. He was old enough to marry by their way of reckoning, old enough to do all the things a Navajo man traditionally did.

“You’re going back to school, then?” Mother laid back the blanket that covered the pile of firewood across the room.

“Yes, I am. I have to finish this year to get the scholarship.

I want to go on to college."

"Johnny, you know what happens if you finish something completely. There is nothing left to live for." Old Mother had taken up the argument now. His grandmother spoke with the authority of years. And, she was used to being obeyed.

"I'm not completing anything, Old Mother. This is just a part of it. There is so much more to be learned. No man can learn everything there is to know."

"It's just an excuse the white man has made up to trap you. You know he lies."

Johnny didn't want to answer. He could still hear the anger in their voices when he had suggested that they might be wrong. "No, Johnny, you don't understand — don't tell us we're wrong — we don't lie — Navajos don't lie." He had thought of asking why, then, did Navajos cheat at cards as a regular practice.

"You have not answered Old Mother, Johnny." His mother placed a few more logs in the fire.

"I do not intend to." Johnny got up and started to walk to another part of the single room of the hogan.

"You sit right back down there, Johnny Begay." Old Mother was after him again. The old woman's brown eyes shone with anger. "No one walks away from me."

"I was just trying to get out of the smoke." Johnny sat down on the blanket by the door.

"I don't care where you were going. Sit down until I tell you otherwise."

"Yes, Old Mother."

"Johnny, I think you should not go to college." The old woman's voice sounded calmer now — almost reasonable.

"Why, Old Mother?" Johnny wondered what it was that she really opposed.

"You know too much of the white man's way already."

"How is that so, Old Mother?" Maybe he could get something out of her this time.

"What the white man has taught you has already disrupted your entire life. He doesn't know the way we were meant to live. He doesn't know the way we do things."

"And you do not know the way he does things, either. You have not seen the good things he has done."

"What good things? Is it a good thing that you are taught to leave your parents and go somewhere where we will never see you again?" Old Mother pulled her blanket around her as if to keep out some terrible loneliness.

"If you had learned how to seal and heat a house, you wouldn't be cold." Johnny felt that this might be an opportunity to prove his point.

"If I could live in a house, I would not know how to do the things they do. No, Johnny, it is better that I stay the way I am. It is better for you too."

Johnny stood up and walked over to the old lady, stooping under the low ceiling designed for a past shorter generation. He held her wrinkled old hand in his and looked into the sunken brown eyes. "At the school they have taught me many things that make life easier. Let me help you have an easier life."

"No, Johnny, I am better off as I am."

"Old Mother, there is so much to learn at the white man's school that I wish you would come to visit me some time before I graduate and go too far away."

The old leathery face cracked into a toothless smile. "It is too far for an old woman to go. I would be lost there among all you young people who know all the white man's ways. No, I'll stay home."

"Let me tell you, then, of what we learn."

"No, Johnny, I couldn't learn it anyway. Tell me what you do there. Are you young men practicing for the dances at the fair this fall? You'll be old enough to compete this year."

"No, I've been too busy with my school work — chemistry, physics, English, mathematics. It takes a great deal to get into college."

"I thought I told you you weren't going to college." Her mother-in-law bell tinkled angrily.

Johnny sat back on his heels. It was silly to ask him to stop — just as silly as the custom of having a woman wear a bell in her hair so that her son-in-law wouldn't look at her and go blind.

"But I have a scholarship to go on to college. They think I'm good enough they want to see that I do get a chance to go on. They are going to pay my expenses."

"So, they pay you now to leave us — to go away from home."

"No, Old Mother, they do not pay us to leave home. They pay our expenses so that we can learn."

"It doesn't mean anything if they don't give you time to learn the dances. How can you cure really sick people without dancing the Yea-bi-chi?"

"We don't need to know the old dances. The white man has medicine that can cure almost any illness without a nine-day festival. And it doesn't cost nine days' food for the whole tribe either."

"The white man has taught you this sacrilege. He cannot see the old ways. Every time he comes across them, he tries to destroy them." Lightning flashed in her eyes.

"You remember that old Sam Gun died last winter in spite of the Sing. All the dances didn't do a thing for him." Johnny stood up, hoping that the added height would give him some sort of advantage.

"You know better than to talk to me like that. Go sit down."

Johnny seated himself again on the rug by the door. His fingers traced the outlines of the bold red, black, and gray design. "I'll be leaving for school soon. I should get some sleep."

"I'll tell you when you can sleep. When I was a little girl. . . ."

Johnny's thoughts drifted off in another direction. Tradition. Nothing but tradition. That was why she would never learn. That was why she opposed his going to college. She was too old to accept the good things that the white man brought. And Mother would support her as long as the old woman lived.

"Johnny, you aren't listening to Old Mother." Yes, Mother was watching him closely as usual.

"I have heard the story before. There is nothing new in it."

"Just the same, you should listen to your elders." The two women were thick as thieves — all respect and tradition.

"It's the white man who's taught him disrespect for us." Old Mother took up the lecture again. "This is what they teach him in that school. How to be improper. How to hurt

his parents. Bah, he should be kept home from school altogether. It is time he learned to live like a man instead of a goat."

"Old Mother, it is not so. If you would come to the school to see me, you could find out what they teach." If only she would listen to him. If only she would come to find out, instead of sitting here in the hogan and talking as if she knew everything.

"Why should I go to the school to see what I can see right here in my own grandson? Do I need to go there to find out that the white man teaches disrespect, when I can see it in you?"

"Mr. Adams, the principal, asked me to come home and ask you to come to graduation. He would like very much to meet you. If you won't come, I'll have to go on without you."

"You are not going back to that school!" Lightning was again reflected in her eyes.

"I am going back and you cannot stop me!" The crash of thunder punctuated his remarks.

"You are not going back to where they teach you disrespect."

"They do not teach disrespect! If you would only come, you could see that it isn't so." Johnny shifted on the rug to get out of the cold draft from the door.

"I don't have to go. I can see that they teach disrespect!" The old woman waved her hand to indicate that the interview was over.

Johnny slowly rose and started out into the storm. It was a long way back to the school at Ganado, and he would have to go alone. The sandstone mesas seemed strangely unfriendly tonight.